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UNCLAS ANKARA 006258

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SIGN OF IMPROVING RELATIONS -- TURKS FIGHT FIRE IN SYRIA

1. Turkish officials over the past year have spoken often of improving relations with Syria. But so far it has been mostly talk, until October 27, when in a surprising show of cooperation, Syria asked for and Turkey delivered planes and fire fighters to put out a blaze along the border of Turkey's Hatay province, which as recently as 1998, looked to be on the front lines of a war between the two countries over Syria's protection of PKK units and leaders.

2. On October 26, a serious fire broke out in Latakia province, which borders the Turkish province of Hatay. Syrian officials were forced to evacuate 25 villages and needed help to control the blaze. Hasan Ipek, head of Turkey's Emergency Management Agency told us Syrian Prime Minister Al-Utri called Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan that night asking for help. Erdogan authorized Ipek to arrange for three planes from the Turkish Army, two Forest Service helicopters and other equipment and personnel to be sent to Syria. After the two foreign ministries worked out details to allow the Turkish planes to cross into Syria, at 5:00 am the equipment and personnel were on their way to Syria. By 10:00 am, the fire was out.

EDELMAN